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ABSTRACT

In light of cultural stereotypes in which Black women function as strong heads of households while Hispanic women serve as obedient wives, a study examined whether Black and Hispanic subjects evaluated assertive speech differently when attributed to a male or female speaker. Subjects, 75 Blacks and 100 Hispanics, all undergraduate students enrolled in speech courses at a public urban college, received one of two versions of a script in which a group of students is meeting to elect a spokesperson in response to a proposed tuition increase. In one half of the scripts a female first name was assigned to the assertive candidate and a male name to the nonassertive candidate, while in the remaining scripts these identifications were reversed. Subjects rated the speakers on 28 word pairs. Ratings of 7 were given to terms such as "courteous" and "strong," while ratings of 1 were given to terms such as "passive" and "nonassertive." Results showed that cultural sexual stereotypes appear to affect rater judgments. Black subjects evaluated the female characters, regardless of linguistic style, in more "positive" terms, while Hispanic subjects tended to perceive the male characters as more "positive." (Twelve references are attached and two tables are appended.) (ARH)

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Do Blacks and Hispanics Evaluate Assertive Male and Female Characters Differently?

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Key Concepts: Assertive speakers, Black, Hispanic, Racial/Ethnic perceptions, Male/Female assertiveness.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine whether black and Hispanic subjects would evaluate assertive speech differently when attributed to a male or female speaker. Cultural sexual stereotypes appeared to affect rater judgments. Black subjects evaluated the female characters, regardless of linguistic style, in more "positive" terms, while Hispanic subjects tended to perceive the male characters as more "positive". These differential perceptions suggest that racial/ethnic background influences speaker evaluations and indicate that future research in gender stereotypic language would benefit from a greater understanding of cultural dynamics.

Do Blacks and Hispanics Evaluate Assertive Male and Female Characters Differently?

"Strident" and "fiesty" were two adjectives used to describe Geraldine Ferraro's campaign style. Yet, according to Robert Luskin, an aide to the former vice-presidential candidate, a man using the same language might be seen as "impassioned or tough" (Batista, 1984, p. 33). Many studies (Baroni & D'Urso, 1984; Berryman-Fink & Wilcox, 1983; Denmark, 1979; Kemper, 1984) have reported differential perceptions of speakers due to gender stereotypes. To date, little has been done on characterizations of gender stereotypic speech by minorities. The aim of this study was to examine whether black and Hispanic subjects would evaluate assertive speech differently when attributed to a male or female speaker.

Several studies (Wagner, 1980; Lebron-Rodriguez, 1980) cite the differences between black and Hispanic women. Latin America has traditionally been agrarian and, despite recent industrialization, the effect has been a prescriptive sex division. A study by Salinas (cited in Andrade & Torres, 1982) analyzed stereotypes of Hispanic women in literature. She was either portrayed as a "good woman", i.e., obedient and pure, or a "bad woman", i.e., promiscuous and evil (p. 28). A survey of family and sex role attitudes (Andrade & Torres, 1982) found Hispanic women to be more "traditional" than either white or black (the least "traditional") females. On the other hand, black women in this country have had a very different experience. From their

arrival, they were forced to work and, "once slavery was abolished, it was very important for [them] to continue working to secure the survival of [their] family" (Lebron-Rodriguez, 1980, p. 2). Black women had to be independent and assertive. Hatchett and Quick (1984) report that "egalitarian sex role attitudes, female employment and female responsibilities for households have all been seen as evidence of dominant, castrating Black women and weak, shiftless Black men" (p. 1). In a survey of 161 black college students, 84% of the respondents felt that black women are better able to cope with societal demands than white women, black men or white men (Martin & Friday, 1982).

Given these different cultural stereotypes, the purpose of this study was to examine whether assertive male and female characters would be evaluated differently by black and Hispanic subjects.

Method

A randomized two-group design was employed, incorporating one factor--sex-based linguistic stereotypes--with two levels: gender -appropriate and -inappropriate language.

Subjects

Two hundred and seventy-nine undergraduate students (126 male and 153 female) participated in this study. They ranged in age from 17 to 45, and the mean age was 18 years. In compliance with college and university policy, any request for information regarding a student's ethnic/racial background must be voluntary. Seventy-eight students did not complete this "optional" item on the questionnaire. Of the remaining 201 participants, 75 identi-

fied themselves as black, 100 as Hispanic, twelve as white, and thirteen as "other", which included a wide range of ethnic, racial and religious groups. Thirty-five black subjects (11 male and 24 female) and 48 Hispanic subjects (23 male and 25 female) received the assertive male/unassertive female (MA+/FA-) questionnaire, and 40 black subjects (20 male and 20 female) and 52 Hispanic subjects (25 male and 27 female) received the assertive male/unassertive female (FA+/MA-) version. All subjects were students enrolled in required and elective speech courses at a non-residential public urban college. Participation in the study was voluntary.

Material

Written scripts were prepared and each consisted of a statement supposedly made by a candidate. The scripts were pre-tested by asking people to read them and to describe the characters. A small rural college was identified as the setting to distinguish it from the large urban university attended by the student raters. In response to a proposed tuition increase, the students are meeting to elect someone to represent them.

The reactions varied so that one candidate, West, was verbally assertive (A+), while the other, Smith, was verbally nonassertive (A-). In one half of the booklets, a female first name, Barbara, was assigned to the West candidate (FA+), and a male first name, David, was given to the Smith candidate (MA-). In the remaining questionnaires, these identifications were reversed so that the assertive speaker was identified as David West (MA+) and the nonassertive character was Barbara Smith

(FA-). Therefore, depending on which booklet a subject received, an identical statement was ascribed to an assertive female and nonassertive male candidate (FA+, MA-), or to an assertive male and nonassertive female candidate (MA+, FA-). In each set of questionnaires, the sequence of presentation was reversed to counteract any possible order effect. The scripts used in the questionnaire are included below.

Setting: A Student Meeting at a Small Rural College

Students are disturbed at reports that the administration plans to raise college fees. The administrators state that as programs have expanded and more faculty have been hired, the cost of running the college has increased rapidly. They claim that they cannot continue to provide the kind of education and courses students want without a tuition increase.

The students have decided to elect someone to represent them. They have organized a meeting to hear the candidates express their views.

Barbara/David Smith: I'm not absolutely sure about how we should handle this crisis. There are a lot of factors we must consider. Suppose we set up a meeting with the administration and see what can be done about eliminating, or at least reducing, this planned tuition increase. Perhaps we could set up several committees to investigate what we can do to help reduce college costs. We must work together to convince the administration that there are other options aside from raising fees next year. Let's see what alternatives are available. Then we can intelligently discuss what we can do.

Barbara/David West: This is absolutely ridiculous. I'm not

interested in hearing about what the college administration has to say. It's the same argument every year. Do you think I plan to just sit here while they increase tuition? I'm sick and tired of listening to their complaints. Talk is cheap. The only way to handle this matter is to take action. That's what I intend to do. Let's not prolong this nonsensical discussion.

Procedure

Six-page questionnaires were prepared and distributed to students enrolled in required and elective speech courses. All subjects were told that the purpose of the study was to examine variations in making "candidate" judgments. They were instructed to imagine what each "speaker" was like and to indicate their impressions on a series of descriptive scales following each script.

Dependent Measures

The major dependent variables in this study were profiles elicited by each combination (MA+, MA-, FA+, FA-). These profiles were obtained from questions asking subjects for impressions of the candidates on a variety of dimensions. Subjects rated the speakers on 28 items using a seven-point scale inserted after each script. The 28 word pairs were selected from Osgood's (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1975) semantic differential scales. These scales were selected on the basis of the pre-test responses and their usefulness in measuring certain personality dimensions in similar research (Denmark, 1979). The following terms were given ratings of 7:

courteous, aggressive, happy, cautious, valuable, sophis-

ticated, cooperative, kind, fair, successful, congenial, refined, calm, attractive, interesting, wise, friendly, positive, flexible, strong, masculine, active, loud, fast, leader, assertive, influential, sensitive.

At the opposite pole, ratings of 1 were assigned to these terms:

discourteous, nonaggressive, sad, rash, worthless, naive, competitive, cruel, unfair, unsuccessful, quarrelsome, vulgar, agitated, unattractive, boring, foolish, unfriendly, negative, rigid, weak, feminine, passive, soft, slow, follower, nonassertive, uninfluential, insensitive.

Items were randomly ordered so that all the positive items were not on the same side of the scale. Subjects were also asked to identify which candidate they would vote for and the reasons for their selection.

Results

Initial Analysis

Mean scores were computed on each item for the A+ and A- candidates. A two-way analysis of variance was performed to test for significance. Candidate selection was analyzed using the chi square statistic.

Interpretations and Discussion

Of the 28 word-pair items, there were three significant two-way interactions for the A+ candidates: "assertive-nonassertive", "flexible-rigid", and "cooperative-competitive". Ethnicity was a significant factor on two traits for the A- candidates: "active-passive" and "cooperative-competitive". Since word-pairs were

randomly ordered, some mean scores were adjusted so that all items with a mean closer to 7 (the first word-pair item) represented "positive" traits and those with a mean closer to 1 "negative" traits. The mean scores are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Cultural sexual stereotypes appear to have some effect on rater judgments, particularly for assertive speakers. On the "assertive-nonassertive" measure, black Ss perceived the FA+ as more "assertive" than the MA+, but this pattern was reversed for Hispanics ($p < .05$). Black Ss rated the MA+ as more "flexible" ($p < .007$) and "cooperative" ($p < .04$), but Hispanic Ss gave higher ratings on these items to the FA+. The FA+ was perceived by black subjects as "assertive", "rigid" and "competitive", while Hispanics viewed the FA+ as "non-assertive", "flexible" and "cooperative". Black Ss rated the A- candidate as significantly more "active" ($p < .02$) and "competitive" ($p < .02$) than the Hispanic Ss.

Although not statistically significant, this same pattern was displayed for A- candidates on several traits. Hispanic judges saw the MA- as more "aggressive" ($p < .07$) and "interesting" ($p < .06$), but black judges gave higher ratings to the FA-. All subjects perceived the MA- as most "sensitive" ($p. < .07$) and the FA+ as most "aggressive" ($p < .07$), but black

raters were more extreme in their judgments of the male and female candidates than Hispanics.

Hispanic women ". . . have been portrayed as essentially non-achievement oriented. In relation to their cultural background, their reason for existence has been interpreted as being a mother and a subservient wife" (Andrade & Torres, 1982, p. 29). The correlative to the submissive female is the macho male--in effect a cultural Rambo! These cultural stereotypes appear to have influenced subject judgments. Hispanic raters tended to characterize the male candidates as more "positive" while the FA+ was perceived in more "negative" terms.

Historically, black women have been thrust into the role of head of household which has led to ambivalence toward the women's movement "because they do not have the same sentiment with the feminist issues" (Martin & Friday, 1982, p. 4). The different cultural experience of black women in this country has contributed to their being characterized as "dominant" and "castrating" (Hatchett & Quick 1984, p. 1). Black subjects evaluated the female candidates, regardless of linguistic style, in more "positive" terms and they perceived the MA+ as more "negative". Black Ss also tended to be more extreme in their ratings--closer to either 1 or 7. Female candidates were characterized as more "positive", and male candidates as more "negative" than corresponding ratings given by Hispanic Ss.

At the end of each questionnaire, students were asked to indicate which candidate they would vote for and reasons for their selection. Of the 175 subjects, 13 did not indicate any candidate preference. Crosstabulations were run on the remaining

162 questionnaires to determine voter preference across respondent sex and speaker gender. Using the chi square statistic, no significance was found. There was no significant relationship between subjects' racial/ethnic identification and speaker style and gender. These data are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Racial/ethnic identification did not have any effect on student voting patterns. In a study comparing political attitudes of black and white male and female students, gender appeared to be a more significant factor in influencing political opinions than race (Avery & Hahn, 1985). Speaker style was a more significant determinant in voter preference than candidate gender or subject racial/ethnic group. This was also reinforced through subject comments on reasons for selecting a particular candidate. Although some students admired a "tough" approach, most felt that the A- candidate would be more successful in negotiations. Sex of speaker was not indicated as a factor for any of the respondents.

Conclusions

The different patterns elicited by Black and Hispanic students suggest that cultural background may influence perceptions of gender stereotypic speech. Black Ss tended to evaluate the female candidate in more "positive" terms, and

Hispanics rated the male characters as more "positive". These differential perceptions are consistent with cultural stereotypes. There is a critical need to conduct more research focusing on the influence of racial and ethnic bias and gender stereotypic language. Particularly for Hispanics, there are few studies which address gender or cultural profiles. The present results indicate that racial/ethnic identification influences speaker evaluations and suggest that understanding sex-based linguistic stereotypes would benefit from a consideration of cultural dynamics.

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Table 1

Cell Means for Candidates by Language Style and Gender

	A+ Candidate		A- Candidate	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Assertive-Nonassertive				
Black Ss	3.86	4.30	4.25	4.32
Hispanic Ss	4.38	3.75	4.06	4.00
Flexible-Rigid				
Black Ss	2.85	2.10	5.32	5.25
Hispanic Ss	1.70	2.28	5.55	5.60
Cooperative-Competitive				
Black Ss	2.37	1.65	4.95	4.97
Hispanic Ss	2.18	2.38	5.69	5.50
Active-Passive				
Black Ss	5.25	6.02	4.62	4.22
Hispanic Ss	5.79	5.94	3.76	3.64

Table 2

Candidate Selection by Language Style and Gender

	A+ Candidate		A- Candidate		COLUMN TOTAL
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Black Ss	7	10	22	29	68
Percentage	10.3	14.7	32.4	42.6	42.0
Hispanic Ss	15	11	37	31	94
Percentage	16.0	11.7	39.4	33.0	58.0
ROW TOTAL	22	21	59	60	162